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BOOK REVIEW

PATRIOT GAMES

By Tom Clancy.

540 pp. New York:

G.P. Putnam's Sons. \$19.95.

By Ross Thomas

JUST after Jack Ryan, a 31-year-old American tourist and former Marine officer, joins his doctor wife and 4-year-old daughter in a park on the very first day of his first visit to London, he hears an explosion. Or "BOOM!" as Tom Clancy puts it. Two heavily armed men are attacking a just disabled Rolls-Royce. Ryan automatically classifies them as Irish Republican Army terrorists and instinctively, or at least without mulling it over much, blindsides, disarms and cripples one of them and kills the other, but not before being wounded himself in a shootout that takes place within hailing distance of Buckingham Palace.

Upon waking in a hospital, Ryan learns that the limousine's passengers were none other than the Prince of Wales; his wife, Princess Diana, and their 4-month-old infant. For his bravery, Ryan is knighted by an understandably grateful Queen Elizabeth; the British start calling him Sir John, and the reader, disbelief by now totally suspended, is still barely three dozen pages into Mr. Clancy's long and bloody novel about terrorism, revenge and how any number of complicated things really work.

Prince Charles, visiting Ryan in the hospital, confesses to being disturbed by press reports that question his own inaction during the attack. In a burst of robust camaraderie that might make some royalists wince, Ryan assures the Prince: "What do reporters know about anything? They don't do anything, for crying out

Ross Thomas's new novel, "Out on the Rim," will be published in October.

loud. . . . You're not some dumb kid, sir. You're a trained pro. Start acting like one." Prince Charles, spine stiffened, thanks Ryan gravely and leaves with a presumably firmer step and steadier eye.

Back in Annapolis, where he teaches history at the Naval Academy while his wife performs eye surgery, Ryan slowly recovers from his wound and politely resists the blandishments of the C.I.A., which wants to recruit him for his brilliantly analytical mind.

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Meanwhile, the terrorist band that calls itself the Ulster Liberation Army (U.L.A.), and is referred to as "a Maoist offshoot of the Provos," is dreaming up yet another terrorist operation that will wreak revenge on Jack Ryan in America and also discredit the rival Provos. It's an elegant but flawed scheme that drives Ryan straight into the willing arms of the C.I.A. There he uses the agency's enormous resources in an attempt to track down the terrorists who have nearly destroyed him and his family.

Sandwiched in between all this action are erudite and clear-as-day descriptions of such things as weap-

ons large and small, satellite photography, eye surgery, the interstices of the Naval Academy and what may seem to some like the longest flight the Concorde ever made from Heathrow to Dulles International Airport.

Mr. Clancy's ability to describe mechanisms and how they work with absolute clarity carries over into his characterization. Not only does he make his protagonist, Jack Ryan, a white knight — both literally and figuratively — but he also makes his fellow heroes just as stalwart and nearly as stuffy.

Save for a lone American black, the villains in "Patriot Games" are all deeply dyed Irish ones, devoid of any compassion or hatred of social injustice or whatever it was, if anything, that turned them into terrorists in the first place.

Yet by sticking to the explicit and obvious, Mr. Clancy — well known as the author of the best sellers "The Hunt for Red October" and "Red Storm Rising" — has written a novel that crackles more than it putters and should quite please those who, given the choice, will pick steadfast black and white over doubtful gray every time. □